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ABSTRACT

Social cognition of adults, unlike children's social understanding, has rarely been addressed from a developmental viewpoint. To extend the developmental perspective to the study of adults' social cognitive skills in relation to other mental and social skills, 52 college students were compared in role taking performance and nonsocial cognitive performance. In addition, subjects' role taking ability was assessed in relation to an interpersonal capacity for intimacy in friendship relations, using the Feffer Role Taking Task instrument, a modified version of the Jourard and Laskow Self Disclosure Questionnaire, and a visual perspective talking task devised by Looft and Charles. As expected, the results revealed a weak and nonsignificant correlation between adults' role taking skills and their nonsocial cognitive abilities, as well as a strong positive association between role taking and level of intimacy in relations with same-sex peers. The findings suggest that further explorations of the links between social cognition and social behavior are needed. (Author/JAC)

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Social cognition, nonsocial cognition and interpersonal processes in adulthood

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Social Cognition, nonsocial cognition and interpersonal processes in adulthood

Adult social cognition, a topic that has received relatively little attention in developmental inquiries, is the focus of the present research. This research represents an attempt to approach this area along developmental lines, with a particular focus on role taking - a cognitive skill which has been emphasized by Mead (1934) and Piaget (1929; 1952) as crucial for social understanding.

Following Piaget, role taking tends to be discussed (e.g., Feffer, 1970; Flavell, 1970; Higgins, 1981; Looft, 1972; Selman, 1971; Shantz, 1975) in terms of decentration, referring to the ability to differentiate one's own viewpoint from those of others and simultaneously to consider multiple perspectives of a social event. It is frequently described as "seeing the world through another's eyes" and is thus contrasted with egocentrism, a state in which the person is embedded in his or her viewpoint (Piaget, 1926). Also in line with the Piagetian paradigm is the trend to focus on children's role taking skills. Very few attempts were made to extend developmental proposals to the study of later life social cognition. Chandler (1973) and Feffer and Suchotliff (1967) examined the relationship of adolescents' and adults' role taking skills to the quality of interpersonal behavior. Lowenherz and Feffer (1969) investigated adults' role taking performance in relation to personality dynamics.

Pursuing a similar line, the present research attempts to further clarify the nature of role taking related skills and interpersonal processes in adulthood. In this study, adults' competencies in various domains were assessed with the aim of determining whether social cognitive abilities are related to other intellectual and social skills. First, the study examined the relation between role taking and a nonsocial cognitive skill - visual perspective taking. This examination was prompted by the continuing debate in the developmental

literature (e.g., Berndt, 1981; Broughton, 1978; Chandler, 1977; Damon, 1979; Gelman & Spelke, 1981; Glick, 1978; Mischel, 1974; Peters, 1974) on the nature of the relationship between social and physical cognition. The question whether parallels can be drawn between processes/skills used in dealing with the impersonal world and those employed in the social domain has been a major developmental concern whose clarification awaits further inquiry. A clearer understanding of the relations among the individual's cognitions in different content domains might also have important consequences for the nature of the paradigm to be adopted in social cognitive research. As recent discussions (e.g., Berndt, 1981; Damon, 1981; Gelman & Spelke, 1981) reveal, the proposed distinction between various types of cognitions has generated a call to study social cognition along different theoretical lines than those used in the study of physical or impersonal cognitive organization. There are thus sufficient reasons for devoting more research efforts towards clarifying the nature of the relationship between the individual's cognitions in the two domains.

To date, questions concerning social versus nonsocial cognitive performance were examined in a number of studies conducted with children (e.g., Coie & Dorval, 1973; Hallos & Cowan, 1973; Rosenberg, 1970; Rothenbaum, 1973; Rubin, 1977). The present research extends this line of inquiry into adulthood. Based on the findings obtained with children showing relatively weak correlations between social and nonsocial cognitive performance, the first hypothesis of this study stated that a similarly weak and nonsignificant relation between adults' cognitive skills in the two domains will be found. Theoretically, this hypothesis draws upon a developmental perspective (e.g., Berndt, 1981, Damon, 1981; Flavell, 1981; Gelman & Spelke, 1981; Hoffman, 1981) which argues that cognition is not unitary, emphasizing profound differences between processes in the different content areas.

The second question examined in the present research was derived from developmental proposals concerning the relation between social cognition and social behavior. This approach has recently received increasing recognition as especially promising in illuminating skills and experiences that are crucial for social understanding. Shantz (1975), for example, has encouraged researchers in the field to study how specific social interactions might influence the development of social cognition. Similarly, Berndt (1981) Damon (1981) and Flavell (1981) suggested that more attention needs to be given to hypotheses that attempt to link social cognition and social behavior. Of particular interest to the present study is the relationship of role taking to intimacy in social contacts. Elkind (1967) has related the emergence in adolescence of intimacy in friendships to gains in role taking skills. According to this view, the establishment of intimacy in peer relations aids in the elimination of adolescent egocentrism and the development of a more mature social cognitive awareness. Pursuing this suggestion into adulthood an interesting possibility emerges. If, indeed, intimacy serves to facilitate social cognitive growth, it is, then, conceivable that variations in social cognitive skills will be related to the level of intimacy in social relations. More specifically, it may be that persons with higher role taking skills have achieved a greater intimacy in interpersonal contacts than those with lower role taking skills. In line with Elkind's (1967) discussion of intimacy which focuses on the communicative aspects of close social contacts, the present research studied intimacy in terms of communication or disclosure about the self, and evlauated its relationship to role taking.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 26 male and 26 female college students all of whom were between the ages of 18-21.

Procedure

For the first session, subjects reported to the laboratory in groups of 10 or less and were initially briefed about the general procedure of the study. Next, the investigator administered Feffer's (1959; 1970) Role Taking Task, which required 25 minutes to complete. Following this, subjects were given a modified version of the Jourard and Laskow (1958) self disclosure questionnaire that was intended to assess level of intimacy in peer relations. Data on the subjects' impersonal cognitive skills were collected approximately a week later. During this later session all subjects were individually tested on a visual perspective talking task devised by Looft and Charles (1971).

When all data were collected, participants were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the study.

Measures

Role Taking. In accordance with the standard RTT instructions (Feffer, 1959; Feffer & Suchotliff, 1966), subjects were first required to make up stories for two Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)- like cards showing five ambiguous figures. Shortly after they had completed writing the stories, participants were presented again with the two cards and were then instructed to retell the initial story from the viewpoint of each story character. Five minutes were allowed for the initial story and 3 minutes for each character elaboration.

The development of RTT is reported elsewhere (Feffer & Gourevitch, 1960; Lowenherz & Feffer, 1969), along with evidence concerning its validity and reliability. Briefly put, role taking is evaluated in terms of the degree to which the story line remains constant while perspectives of the various characters are differentiated and integrated. In the present version, only two of the three RTT scoring categories (Schnall & Feffer, Note 1) were used. The cognitively most primitive category of role taking was omitted, since results of pilot work showed that adults do not vary on this dimension. Each

elaboration of the initial story was scored for RTT performance, and these were then summed to produce a total score for a story. The subject's final RTT score was the average of scores for two stories.

Interjudge reliability for role taking was based on fifteen protocols selected at random from the sample scored blindly and independently by two scorers trained in the use of the RTT scoring criteria. The Spearman rank difference correlation was .88. Remaining protocols were scored blindly by one of the scorers.

Intimate self disclosure in peer relations. Sixteen test items from the Jourard and Laskow (1958) self disclosure questionnaire were used. These were selected by four judges who reviewed the original sixty self disclosure items with the intent of identifying items dealing with highly intimate topics. (Examples of selected items: what it takes to get me feeling depressed and blue; what it takes to hurt my feelings; the kind of things that make me feel elated; the aspects of my personality that I dislike). Subjects were instructed to rate along a 3 point scale the extent to which they talked about these items to two target persons. These were: best same sex friend, and best opposite sex friend. For each subject, two scores were obtained indicating amount of intimate self disclosure to the two target persons.

Visual perspective taking. This impersonal cognitive ability was measured with a task devised and used by Looft and Charles (1971) with adult subjects. This task is based on the general procedure used by Piaget and Inhelder (1956) with children, but modified by Looft and Charles to make it more appropriate for adults. Each subject, tested individually, was seated at a table opposite to the investigator. Lying on the table between the subject and the investigator was a 5 x 6 matrix board on which appeared six large red dots arranged in a particular fashion. Directly in front of the subject was another board which

had four smaller 5 x 6 matrices. The subject was asked to reconstruct the investigator's visual perspective ("mentally put yourself into the place of the investigator") and to select from the four matrices, the pattern which illustrated the perspective held by the investigator. Six of these items were included in the task yielding scores in the range from zero to six.

Results

Preliminary analyses revealed no main effects or interactions due to sex of subject. Accordingly, the results were collapsed across this variable. Subjects' reports about intimacy in relations with same-sex and opposite sex peers were, however, analyzed separately.

As expected, a relatively weak and nonsignificant association was found between the subjects' social cognitive performance and their nonsocial cognitive performance. The correlation between role taking and visual perspective taking test-scores was .12.

To evaluate the hypothesized relationship between role taking and intimacy, the distribution of role taking scores was split at the median, and *t* tests were used comparing high and low role takers in amount of reported intimate self disclosure to each target person. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of groups at two levels of role taking in scores of self disclosure. One tailed *t* test comparisons revealed significant differences in amount of disclosure to same sex peers. As expected, high role takers reported themselves to disclose significantly more to same sex friends than low role takers, $t\ (50) = 2.069$, $p < .05$. With regard to amount of reported intimate disclosure to opposite sex friends, the difference between high and low role taking scorers was in the predicted direction, but did not reach significance.

Discussion

This initial attempt to clarify the relation between adults' social cognitive skills and their skills in various other domains has yielded several noteworthy findings. First, the relationship between role taking and visual perspective

taking was shown, as expected, to be weak and nonsignificant. Since the present investigation focused on few social and nonsocial cognitive skills, it seems unwarranted to conclude that the two domains are entirely independent. Also, it should be noted that developmentalists (e.g., Damon, 1979; Berndt, 1981; Hoffman, 1981) emphasizing a distinction between social and physical cognition do not maintain that there is never a relationship between the two kinds of cognitions. Rather, it has been suggested that the two diverge in their development and that cognitive growth in the social and the physical domains cannot be accounted for in terms of a single set of mechanisms. The present results strengthen this proposition. More research is, of course, needed to assess social versus nonsocial cognitive performance in terms of a variety of skills in order to determine whether the individual's compentencies in the different domains are distinct. Future studies might also attempt to examine various other aspects of role taking. Higgins (1981) has recently argued that role taking is not unidimensional, suggesting thereby that dimensions other than decentration need to be explored in relation to both social and nonsocial cognitions. Questions concerning possible individual differences in the various dimensions of role taking should also be included in future investigations.

The second finding of this research yielded support for the hypothesized relationship between role taking and intimacy in social contacts. High role taking subjects reported a greater intimacy in relations with same sex peers than low role taking subjects. This finding could be interpreted in terms of Elkind's (1967) suggestion that intimate communication might lead to better role taking. Through intimate discourse with a friend the person may gain access to new informations, be exposed to the inadequacies of one's own viewpoint and be subsequently engaged in coordination between perspectives.

In short, self disclosure and other forms of intimate communication could provide one with ample role taking opportunities which, in turn, might contribute to significant gains in such skills. This interpretation is also in line with the recent discussions of Brendt (1981) Flavell (1981) and Higgins (1981) on the possible influences of social interactions on interpersonal understanding. Note, too, that the present findings are essentially correlational and cannot provide conclusive evidence that intimate social interactions play a causal role in social cognitive growth. Suggestions concerning developmental patterns must also await more evidence, preferably longitudinal. Still, it would seem that the present findings have developmental implications worthy of inquiry in future research.

One aspect of the data concerning the relationship between role taking and intimacy merits further attention. High and low role takers were found to differ significantly in amount of reported self disclosure to same-sex peers but not to opposite-sex peers. Also note that the data reveal a trend to disclose less to opposite sex friends. Both high and low role taking scorers tended to report less intimacy in heterosexual relations. This finding might be viewed as surprising. Because prior research (e.g., Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Offer, Marcus & Offer, 1970; Winer, 1970) revealed that relations with opposite sex peers begin to assume a marked importance during adolescence, one might have expected that the heterosexual ties of young adults would be characterized by a greater intimacy. The suggestions offered below to reconcile these seemingly conflicting findings also highlight some issues concerning the relevance of various affective ties for social understanding.

Specifically, it may be that the importance attached to heterosexual ties in young adulthood and the intense emotions that accompany such relationships in their initial development interfere with the establishment of intimacy.

As Sullivan (1953) has indicated, the development of ease in heterosexual relations may be a long one continuing well beyond the adolescent years. The young adult, like the adolescent, may still relate to the opposite sex with anxiety and intense fears of rejection which are likely to stifle intimate communication. On the other hand, relationships with "chums" may be associated with feelings of trust and security, and the confidence of being understood and accepted, all of which could facilitate intimate self disclosure. To the extent that this interpretation is correct, there is the suggestion that affect may both aid and interfere with the achievement of intimacy, thereby having differential consequences for social cognition. Some but not all affective ties may serve to facilitate social understanding. Future inquiries might direct attention to a variety of emotions associated with different interpersonal contacts and examine their possible influence on social cognition.

It should be noted that developmental research has largely ignored the role of affect in social cognition. The impact of social-environmental factors on the development of role taking skills has been examined mainly in terms of amount and type of verbal interaction between the child and his or her parents (Dlugokinski & Firestone, 1974; Hollos & Cowan, 1973; Shantz, 1975). The present discussion suggests that the child's affective environment in addition to the child's "linguistic" environment needs to be studied in terms of the different role taking opportunities it provides. As Hoffman (1981) has noted, social cognition, unlike physical cognition cannot be studied without recourse to affect.

Conclusion

Social cognitive research has been characterized (Berndt, 1981) as standing at the intersection of two research areas, studies of physical or impersonal cognition and studies of social behavior. On the basis of the present findings it can be argued that further explorations of the links between social cognition

and social behavior might be especially fruitful. In particular, it seems worthwhile to devote more research effort towards identifying social experiences similar to intimacy that could contribute to social understanding. Research along these lines should be conducted with both children and adults. As the present study indicates, adult research might aid to define new issues for developmental considerations. There is also the need to integrate affect into the analysis of social cognition. This suggestion has recently received additional support by the finding of an association between adults' social cognitive skills and their affective capabilities (Sommers, 1981). Further research on affect-social cognition linkages could perhaps increase our understanding of how the individual's social-affective life might serve to facilitate changes in social cognition.

Reference Note

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Table 1

Relationship Between Role Taking and Intimacy in Peer Relations

	Level of role taking				
	High role takers[a]		Low role takers[b]		
	M	SD	M	SD	p[c]
Intimate disclosure to same-sex peer	22.30	5.94	18.73	6.23	$< .05$
Intimate disclosure to opposite sex peer	20.92	6.90	18.07	7.96	ns

[a] $n = 26$.

[b] $n = 26$.

[c] One-tailed t test.